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SOME THOUGHTS ON PUBLIC SUPPORT
OF THE CREATIVE ARTIST //

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Notes for the W.A. Riddell Lecture
in the Fine Arts,
University of Saskatchewan,
Regina, February 19, 1973

By André Fortier, Director,
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SOME THOUGHTS ON PUBLIC SUPPORT OF THE CREATIVE ARTIST

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If we are to believe Boswell, few people have felt more pride in the artistic achievements of their fellows at school than the great Dr. Johnson. It was the poets his school produced that most moved Dr. Johnson. Readers today may be struck most by the elegance and felicity of phrase of the poems of Johnson and his contemporaries, but he himself, I have been told, would weep copiously from a sheer excess of emotion when he read them. "Sir," he once said, "We are a nest of singing birds."

Now I do not for a moment suggest that Professor Leyton-Brown would boast so openly about the achievements in the arts at Regina over these past 60 years. But he is a member of the Council that I serve, and his quiet, intense pride in the university is something that one soon becomes aware of. A representative of the Canada Council comes to Saskatchewan as a junior partner in the business of promoting the arts. At Regina I see that there was active study of music and the visual arts at a time when Ottawa was much more interested in the military maneuvers of Kaiser Wilhelm than in the tone poems of Richard Strauss, and your Saskatchewan Arts Board was already at work in 1957 when our Council was founded.

Among the things that have impressed us at the Council is how the Division of Fine Arts, under the wise direction of Dean Nulf, has worked to create an active interest in the arts in the community as a whole, and, within the Division, to foster a climate in which

there is some cross-pollination between the different art forms. The Norman Mackenzie Art Gallery is indeed outstanding in its work on behalf of different publics in the community, and in promoting the artists of Saskatchewan, and here I would like to express the hope that even in these days of shrinking university budgets the gallery will continue to receive the enlightened support of the university in pursuing these objectives. Ladies and gentlemen of Regina, in the fine arts you are the very model of a modern university. If we extend Dr. Johnson's notion to include drama, music, and the visual arts you are -- Dare I say it? -- a nest of singing birds.

Of course, an informed interest in the arts and creativity permeates all of a university. The direction my remarks here today will take was influenced by a working paper presented at a Unesco conference in Ottawa last September by Prof. A.J. Cropley of the Dept. of Psychology here at Regina. Professor Cropley used certain findings of experimental psychology to show how the existence of a number of different cultures within a society might be expected to foster creativity within that culture. It was an illuminating paper, so much so that it led me to undertake some reading of academic studies on creativity.

I hasten to say that I do not intend to present a "review of the literature" on creativity, but only to mention various theories and studies insofar as they have helped me clarify my own thoughts on the how and why of public support of the individual creative artist. At a talk given last November at York University I described creativity as a process made up of three closely interacting components, creation, communication and consumption. My purpose was to show how quantitative studies might be useful in improving the quality of the arts and to suggest

how areas in need of study might be identified. Presupposed in this talk is the utilitarian notion that public support of the arts must be planned so as to bring desired states of feeling in as many people as possible. Today I will question the core idea of "creation", or creativity as it is usually understood, and the value of utilitarian theories of public management in dealing with support of the creative artist.

To judge by what I have read -- and I don't suppose I need remind you that you are listening to a layman -- a good deal has been learned about innovative behaviour, or what is called "divergent thinking", and about personality characteristics of individuals generally accepted by the community as creative, but the core ideas continue to escape behavioral scientists. In a 1968 study of creative research scientists, R.J. Shapiro wrote that "one of the disheartening conclusions emerging from approximately fifteen years of intensive research is that little progress has been made on achieving acceptable criteria of creativity." It has been suggested too that high scores on tests of "divergent thinking" are a "necessary but not a sufficient condition for creative work."

My desultory readings in the field of psychoanalysis would indicate that there too one finds a certain diffidence about defining what makes up a work of art and how exactly a work of art is created. Here the question is pinpointed rather more narrowly than in behavioral studies, or at least it has been in what I have read. It is a question of art rather than of creativity in general, which latter, as we know, would include innovation in mathematics,

science, management, and other areas as well as in art. In this field there have been many fine monographs about particular works of art and individual artists and about specific aspects of artistic endeavour, very notably those written by Freud himself. But there are a number of often cited quotations which show that this great thinker felt, as many of his successors have, that much about artistic creation defied analysis. Late in his career, Freud declared that: "Before the problem of the creative artist, analysis must, alas, lay down its arms".

To these exalted studies on creativity we may perhaps add the thoughts, however difficult and confused, all of us may have had at one time or another about this difficult question. I think of a series of notions that crossed my mind a few weeks ago in Ottawa. It was during one of those extended winter thaws that send many of us home to bed with the flu, but remind the survivors that in February winter only seems to be the permanent lot of homo canadiensis. During spells of mild weather, the other seasons, and most notably springtime, are at least imaginable.

Some lines from the American poet e.e. cummings crossed my mind often during this thaw. I do not want to spoil this poem for you, and I don't doubt that most of you are familiar with it. I will quote only the opening lines, so that you can be sure which poem I mean:

in Just-
spring when the world is mud-
luscious the little
lame balloonman

whistles far and wee

Having now eliminated whatever small temptation you may have had to call me to Regina to read poetry, I can proceed. To me this poem is in itself an all but perfectly realized work of art. As a consumer -- if I can use so harsh a term -- I am satisfied that I have understood the intention of the artist, and am able to see the images suggested by the poem. But its effect goes beyond this, because it reminds me irresistibly of my own childhood and of that first perfect day of spring, when the sky is reflected blue in puddles and the sun looks as though it had been painted in by an eight year old child. I believe it would have a somewhat similar effect on many readers, that it would stimulate something very like a creative act corresponding to that of the poet.

On the other hand, these effects could possibly be brought about by something that few sensible persons would call an "all but perfectly realized work of art." Some of the older listeners here may recognize the song I am about to quote. I will not sing it, and I am glad to say that I am not sure if I remember the words correctly. The words went something like this:

In spring time,
The only ring-a-ling time,
When birds do sing,
Ding, ding, a ding, ding.

I will admit that these lines too went through my head during our wintertime thaw in Ottawa. I believe that I know what the composer had in mind and am sure that I understand the images suggested. And who knows what personal acts of creation this or any other

combination of words might stimulate in the listener? But I am sure that it is not much of a work of art. In other words, on reflection I can see that, in general terms, the good effects on me of the cummings poem are not what makes it a work of art.

Then too there are lines of poetry that are generally accepted as works of art, but which may be used in a way that will prevent them from stirring any artistic reaction in the listener. Take the lines:

If winter comes can spring be far behind.

and:

The hounds of spring are on winter's traces.

If one were to develop the habit of collaring people during the depths of winter to recite these isolated lines to them, the results would be uncreative in the extreme, perhaps even dangerous. To recite the lines in such a context would have about the same creative value as, say, to constantly probe at an aching tooth with one's tongue.

So even the non-expert such as myself finds that it is not easy to arrive at clear ideas of why a work of art is that and not something else. On a less exalted level, we share the difficulties that scientists have experienced in this regard. This does not mean that the reflections of each of us are not valuable, and of course scientific research on creativity needs no recommendation from me.

It occurs to me in fact that academic work now being done on creativity has some relevance to Canada Council programs of assistance

to the arts. I will mention these ideas only briefly, since, and I repeat the point, my reading in the field has been casual. I must put some of the blame for even venturing tentatively in so complex a field to the example of Dr. Cropley, whose masterful hypothesis on the possible beneficent effects of polyculturalism gives confidence to even a non-expert such as myself.

For example, experimental work in creativity may eventually suggest means by which the Council can identify ventures which will lead to a greater public participation in artistic creation. I am thinking here of research in the broad field of assessing creative responses to psychological testing and in problem-solving situations, as well as study of how to develop creative talent. We at the Council see great promise in certain new developments in the visual arts, most particularly in videotape production, and in the emphasis many young artists are placing on public participation in the work of creation. Research in creativity may lead us to other avenues of encouraging participation, and to a better understanding of existing ones.

It is pleasing to note too that some remarks by psychologists involved in testing outstandingly creative persons tend to confirm what we have already heard from artists we call on as consultants. On the advice of these artists -- many dozens of them over the years -- the Council has developed its programs of assistance to individual artists so as to allow them as much leeway as possible in using their grants to develop their talents as they see fit. A very prominent psychologist says much the same thing in a book reviewing

the development of personality measurement tests for outstandingly creative persons (Frank Barron, Creative Person and Creative Process, 1969). According to Dr. Frank Barron, the creative process "goes at its own pace, will not be hurried, is behaviorally silent for long periods of time, and is easily aborted if someone is always blowing the whistle at it". Here too is an area of study which may have much to teach bodies concerned with funding the arts.

Having made these tentative suggestions, with what I hope was a proper degree of humility, I would now like to turn to one of the many philosophers and humanists who have talked about the concept of creativity as applied to art. In his book, The Principles of Art (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1955), the British philosopher R.G. Collingwood conscientiously outlines a number of theories on the subject, and then spiritedly dismisses all of them. He then asks, what is a work of art? and what is artistic creation? I would like to quote a few lines from his answer to these two questions:

"We are not asking for theories but for facts. And the facts for which we are asking are not recondite facts. They are facts well known to the reader. The order of facts to which they may belong may be indicated by saying that they are the ways in which all of us who are concerned with art habitually think about it, and the ways in which we habitually express our thoughts in ordinary speech".

Nothing could be clearer. We arrive at a knowledge of the core notions of art and artistic creation not by theorizing but by reflecting on what we already know. The philosopher is not speaking of everyone, but of those individuals who have a serious interest in art, or more exactly those "whose experience of the subject-matter has been sufficient to qualify them for reading books of this kind".

I am not sure, however, that all of his readers who qualify in this way would have the mental agility that R.G. Collingwood displays as he goes on from this initial statement to a discussion of what it is that makes artistic creation distinct from other kinds of innovative work. I leave such matters to philosophers. For me this virtuosity suggests that we have much to learn from artists, humanists and philosophers. It is to them that we must turn for illumination on qualitative aspects of the arts, as well as for definition of core ideas. And, of course, it is on this assumption that the Canada Council has proceeded through its policy of basing grant-making decisions on the best available artistic advice.

The Massey Report, on whose recommendations the Canada Council was founded, was also based on a number of humanistic assumptions of this order. Among other things, it makes a passionate plea for support of the creative artist. At the beginning of the relevant chapter, the report has this to say:

"It has been suggested to us that one measure of the degree of civilization attained by a nation might fairly be the extent to which the nation's creative artists are supported, encouraged,

and esteemed by the nation as a whole."

From what follows it can be seen that the authors of the report embraced this suggestion wholeheartedly. Throughout the report there is the overriding assumption that "there are important things in the life of a nation which cannot be weighed or measured".

From its beginnings then, Canada's support of the arts has been based on something other than the utilitarian measures that underly many aspects of government planning in this and other countries. For example, in the Washington-based Arts Reporting Service (Oct. 2, 1972) an editorialist has recently noted with some bitterness that, unlike Canada, "The United States cherishes pragmatism and didn't search for a seminal concept (such as that of the Massey Report) before proceeding with its Federal program for the arts and humanities. (It was) a practical problem, with a practical solution, no different from any of the other problems and solutions to come before the nation."

Well, I believe that we cherish pragmatism in Canada as much as they do in the United States and other countries. In my talk at York University, I hoped in fact to stimulate research that would make it possible to undertake more systematic planning of support for the arts. Here I should add that I was thinking mostly of support of arts organizations, which now takes up the greater part of the Council's funds for the arts, and of efforts to encourage wider participation of the public in the creative arts, which will take on more importance in the future. Utilitarian measures - that is, making policies that will bring about desirable states of mind

in as many people as possible - must be used in the formulation of most Canada Council programs in support of the arts.

At the same time I believe that the utilitarian ethic is not in itself a sufficient measure of a program of support to the arts. As the British philosopher, Stuart Hampshire, pointed out in a recent essay (New York Review of Books, Jan. 25, 1973), few people today believe in the perfectibility of mankind through increasing moral enlightenment and improved standards of education, as is presupposed by utilitarianism. The savagery of the last four decades, in which planning of this kind has generally prevailed in advanced countries, is a strong indication that, by itself, an impersonal utilitarian scheme, weighing benefits against costs, is not a guarantee of progress, and may, on the contrary, lead to, in Stuart Hampshire's words, "a dull destructive political righteousness".

Support of the creative artist is particularly difficult to justify in utilitarian, cost-benefit terms. I have already pointed out some problems involved in defining a work of art and the act of artistic creation in measurable terms, and to this it must be added that the creative artist may actually seem to be a disruptive element in the society in which he lives. It is no accident that there has been a notable reluctance in some countries which back arts organizations to extend state support to individual artists. I believe that our country has been a leader in this area, and that this is due to the humanistic assumptions of the Massey Report and to those who have from the beginning been involved in formulating the policies of the Canada Council. Most notably I

think of Peter Dwyer.

While the Canada Council, like all organizations which disburse public funds, must move forward to develop rational plans for support of the arts, it can never forget the complex and vitally important reality behind this support. Utilitarian planning is beneficial when it is put at the service of the kind of sensitivity to the arts embodied in the Massey Report. I believe that this is more than a marriage of convenience, and that we must be able to devise programs that will bring tangible benefits to increasing numbers of Canadians while not losing sight of the creative artist whose contributions may not seem immediately useful.

ANDRÉ FORTIER

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